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**New, Better, Different?  
Peak Unionism and the Your Rights at Work Campaign in New South Wales, 2004-2007**

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*Track 2 Voice and Representation at Work*

## **New, Better, Different?**

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Faced with not only new forms of work and politics, but also challenges to traditional forms of organisation, trade unions have for some time been seeking new ways to defend their constituency. These secular trends and general problems took an immediate and particular political form in Australia after the federal general election of 2004 when a neo-liberal government emerged with an unrivalled opportunity to reduce trade union power. The government specifically set out to promote individual agreement-making and to place extraordinary restrictions on collective bargaining and the freedom to associate. With the union movement's two main sites of strength – tribunals and the workplace – no longer viable as sources of power, new 'repertoires of contention' (Turnbull, 2006) were needed. Change in trade union policy is normally considered difficult (Cooper, 2002; Pocock, 1998), so what happened in this case?

The trade unions came together to run a wide-ranging political campaign which was ultimately decisive in the election (Spies-Butcher and Wilson, 2008). The 'Your Rights at Work' campaign against the government's *Work Choices* laws was highly visible, expensive and complex. This paper concentrates on the role of one state-level peak body, Unions New South Wales, which saw itself as the leading force in constructing a new and better kind of campaign than had been waged in the past against hostile governments. This peak union's history had been built around successful peak-level exchange with the Australian Labor Party (Markey, 1994, 2004) but it now moved to coordinate a campaign with a self-styled 'grassroots' focus while also providing the link between the national campaign run by the Australian Council of Trade Unions and many affiliate unions.

The paper explains how and why the peak body was able to run this campaign. In so doing it begins the empirical task of providing a detailed mapping of the origins, development, nature and implications of the campaign, something not yet attempted. More importantly, it provides a series of theoretical insights into union purpose and union strategy and, in particular, into the role of peak unionism in an environment which is not only generally volatile and hostile but in which the particular sources of peak union power are under attack (for a discussion of peak union power see Ellem *et al*, 2004).

The paper asks questions which stem from two sources, the architects of the campaign and the scholars who have addressed related issues about how unions change, how peak unions operate and how different scales of activity – national, state, local – intersect in building union power. We interrogate the ways in which the framers of the campaign saw their work and go on to ask more specific questions of these matters. The paper therefore deals with questions such as:

1. Was the YR@W campaign genuinely new, and, if so, exactly how? That is, what were key characteristics of the campaign – industrial, political, electoral or community?
2. What does it mean to say that the campaign was a success? What were the benchmarks?
3. Did the relationships and networks in which Unions NSW was embedded change during the campaign?
4. How and why did strategic change take place and what role did leadership (following Cooper, 2002, 2003) play?

## 5. What might be the future of this kind of campaigning?

Much of the originality in the paper stems from its method. The research began as an internal report for Unions NSW. Therefore the research questions emerged from discussions between the sponsors of the research, the researchers themselves and the emerging evidence. The research proceeded through open-ended interviews (before and after the federal election) and through very extensive work on documentary material, electoral data and media coverage.

We concluded that the Your Rights at Work campaign could indeed be seen as new in approach and grassroots in focus, as its leadership believed. However, the campaign was also more complex than this. It was characterised by a *melding* of old and new, the creation of a powerful *self-image*, and by being *simultaneously constructed* in many locations and at many scales. The major attributes which we identified were complex, pointing to the tensions within such a multi-faceted campaign as well as to its promise. For example, the campaign both built upon and broke with the past and exhibited both ‘top-down’ and ‘bottom-up’ strategising and practice. It revealed the importance of marketing a consistent message or umbrella ‘brand’, which in turn required not only mobilisation in order to make the brand locally visible but also discipline to maintain consistency about that message. It was also very clear that despite the latitude given to the local Rights at Work groups in targeted electorates, the campaign owed much to the planning, cohesion and power of the Unions NSW leadership, building on already existing internal resources. Finally, the integration of a diverse range of campaign activities – at both the mass mobilisation and local community scales – was an important feature of the success of the campaign. On the other hand, there were problems: goals and successes were not clearly benchmarked; the initial goal of mobilising new union members was not successful; the building of community coalitions was poor.

Beyond this particular campaign, there are questions about, and implications for, local activity and also for peak bodies like Unions NSW. The paper points to the possibility and limitations upon peak bodies developing as ‘campaigning organisations’, and the gains and challenges inherent in this approach.

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